

Frank J. Creede

423/H

Stalag IX-B (9-B)

"Swamped by the Germans"

Pfc Frank J. Creede Jr., age 19, was assigned to a heavy machine gun squad, "H" Company, 2nd Battalion, 423rd Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division, arrived at Le Havre, France, December 3, 1944 and replaced the Second Division in the Schnee Eifel mountains of the Ardennes, December 11, 1944. The 2nd Battalion was in reserve in Born, Belgium, and on December 16, 1944, moved through Schonberg on the Our River (the border between Belgium and Germany) to plug a gap in the line caused by the withdrawal of the 2nd Division in support of the First Army offensive at Aachen, Germany.

We were guarding a heavily wooded, hilly forest on the western slope of the Schnee Eifel when the Germans burst through the lines heading for the Meuse River – objective Antwerp.

In the frozen forests of the Ardennes, an army of 250,000 men with 2,000 pieces of artillery and 980 tanks awaited the hour of attack at 5:30 a.m., December 16, 1944. This was described as a quiet sector where no heavy engagement other than patrol activity was anticipated. Little did we know that two days later we would be attempting to retake Schonberg and that Kampfgruppe Peiper of the 1st SS Panzer Division (Malmedy Massacre) followed by the Fuhrer Begleit Brigade would be passing through Born shortly after we moved to the front line.

The quiet ended in a shattering eruption of fire and steel five days later; in another two days two regiments and supporting artillery and armor of the Golden Lion Division were wiped out.

In those two days the men of two regiments were engulfed by the overwhelming might that the Germans' breakthrough spearheads.

The story of the 106th's disaster started in the foggy dawn on December 16 as it occupied position around the Schnee Eifel, a rocky, wooded ridge 10 miles long and two miles wide astride the Siegfried Line.

The Germans turned their guns then on the 422nd and 423rd Regiments and followed with infantry and tank assaults. By daybreak of December 17 the Germans had thrown two divisions into this part of the front and by mid-morning enemy columns were swarming around the Schnee Eifel. They swamped the 422nd, 423rd Regiments and the 424th was forced to withdraw.

At the 3:35 p.m. on December 18, the radio said that all units of the two regiments were in need of ammunition, food and water. Parachuting of supplies was out of the question because of the fog.

While one German pincer moved through the Losheim gap the other advanced south of the Schnee Eifel. The threatened link-up would surround the two regiments defending the high ground. The defenders did not comprehend the true situation. Secure in good positions, they spent an easy day repulsing an occasional German patrol. Proud of their ability to hold their ground in this, their first combat, they did not realize that they confronted a German replacement battalion and that the real decision was taking place deep on either flank.

Surprise, coupled with dense fog, allowed the German assault companies to advance to almost on top of the American positions before detection. In some cases the attackers annihilated entire platoons before they could react.

At only one point did the Germans achieve the type of clean breakthrough that "*Wacht am Rhein*" required. The seven-mile-wide Losheim Gap provided an east to west invasion route that the Germans had used in 1870, 1914, and 1940. Remarkably, it was the sector on the Ardennes front most likely held by the Americans. One-half of the 14th Cavalry Group, about 900 men, was responsible for the southern five miles. Normally, they were attached to the adjacent 106th Infantry Division.

The enemy was now closing a pair of pincers on the two American regiments on the Schnee Eifel. On the morning of 17 December, the second day of the battle, General Alan Jones telephoned his Corps commander, General Troy Middleton, at Bastogne on a bad line, which caused a serious misunderstanding. Both men were concerned about the 422nd and 423rd but Middleton was reluctant to sanction a withdrawal and Jones perhaps gave Middleton too sanguine an impression. By now the 14th Cavalry Group had pulled right back to the north-west of St Vith and the German 294th Grenadier Regiment had swung south to capture Schonberg, cutting the main road from the Schnee Eifel to St Vith. Another regiment of the 18th Volksgrenadier Division (word missing) the early morning on the 17th December and by 9:00 a.m. they had linked up with their sister regiment at Schonberg.

The Germans were now concentrating on moving their forces forward to capture St Vith and throughout the 17th December made no attempt to attack the 9,000 Americans trapped on the Schnee Eifel. Late that night General Jones sent a message to his regiments, telling them to break out to the west and promising an air drop of ammunition, food and water. The U.S. troop carrier aircraft, back at Welford in England, loaded these supplies and flew out to Belgium, but a lack of coordination and drive led to the drop being canceled.

Next day the two regimental commanders agreed to begin the move west, but from then onward each regiment acted independently and with a steady deterioration in control. The 423rd tried to attack towards Schonberg, but was stopped by enemy fire. One battalion became separated from the regiment and was fired on in error by part of the 422nd. Eventually 423rd Infantry surrendered.

The 422nd Regiment came to a similar sad end. In moving towards Schonberg the regiment lost the way. At daybreak the three battalions moved out once more and were just crossing Bleialf-Auw road, when they were hit by tanks from the Fuhrer Begleit

Brigade, Hitler's Bodyguard, then an independent tank brigade moving up to help German Division capture St Vith. At 2:30 p.m. Colonels George Descheneaux and Charles Cavender surrendered some 7,000 Americans as prisoners of war.

Major General Allen Jones lost communication and believed his orders were to remain in our existing positions. The 422nd and 423rd Regiments were surrounded by the 18th and 62nd Volksgrenadier Divisions by December 17, 1944. On December 19, 1944, at 4:00 p.m. the two colonels surrendered 7,000 men to the Germans. We were without food, water and ammunitions, had no armor and much of our artillery was destroyed. General Hasso von Manteuffel, commander of the 5th Panzer Army, spent the night of December 17 in the town of Schonberg which was behind us on the Schonberg - St Vith road.

We slept the first night in a churchyard in Prum, Germany, marched to Bitburg, Germany, and to Gerolstein and spent four days in 40' x 8' box cars arriving at **Stalag IX B**, Bad Orb, on December 25, 1944. There was no Christmas dinner waiting for us.

While we were in the Rail Marshaling Yard at Koblenz, British Mosquito bombers bombed a half mile from our line of car and we were staffed by American plane in Stalag IX B, 37 miles north of Frankfurt.

I lost 32 pounds on 600 calories a day. I was liberated April 2, 1945, back in New York April 28, 1945 and home in San Francisco on V.E. Day.

Source: *The Bulge Bugle February 2006*
<http://www.battleofthebulgememories.be/stories26/us-army25/943-swamped-by-the-germans.html>
Henri ROGISTER, webmaster